

Book review: James Sloam, Matt Henn: Youthquake 2017 - The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain

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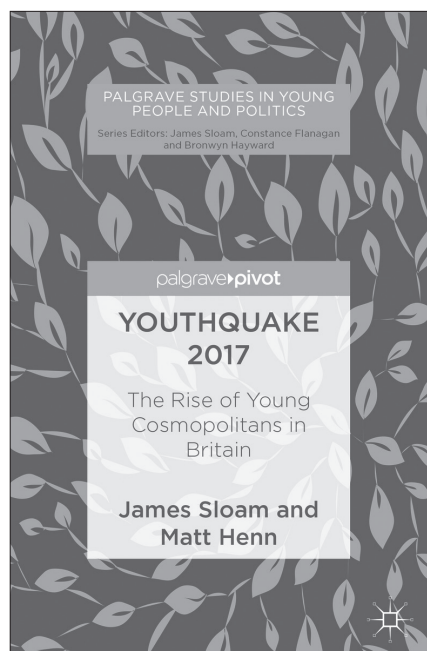
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James Sloam / Matt Henn: *Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain*

Reviewed by Simon Pistor

One might argue that the 2016 British European Referendum and its Brexit vote has brought about two distinct results. First, the vote produced the UK's historic decision to leave the European Union. However, after three years of political conundrum, we still don't know whether the UK will – or can – eventually follow through on its decision. At this point in time, the political, economic, and social fallout of Brexit is everybody's guess. Second, in an attempt to secure a better negotiation position for the UK, the then-prime minister Theresa May called for a General Election in June 2017. Instead of a triumphant victory for the Conservative Party, the campaign saw a surge of the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. Even though ultimately losing out, the movement behind Labour's surprising success was labelled a *youthquake* by British media – even prompting the Oxford Dictionary to declare *youthquake* their word of the year for 2017. These (ongoing) political developments prompted James Sloam, Reader in Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway University in London, and Matt Henn, Professor of Social Research at Nottingham Trent University, to write a very timely book. Their *Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain* challenges widespread narratives about the politically uninterested youth. Using the toolsets of comparative politics, Sloam and Henn's overall claim is that it was a youth movement based on a broader appeal to the needs of young people (especially by the Labour Party) which spiked the higher voter turnout among young people. Their book introduces the notion of a "youthquake" as an analytical concept within electoral and youth studies.

In the first chapter, Sloam and Henn sketch their theoretical and comparative framework. They do not only consult electoral results but also broader social and political changes over the past decades. Sloam and Henn argue that the 2017 UK General Election was a "transformative election" (1). On the one hand, age – and not class – was the most important predictor of voting intentions. On the other hand, Young Millennials changed the political landscape of Britain dramatically (1). In line with Inglehart's "post-materialist thesis", Sloam and Henn argue that an individualisation of values and lifestyles led to an intergenerational cleavage in voter behaviour (2). The conceptual strength of Sloam and Henn's approach lies in their categorising young British voters as "young left-cosmopolitans" (3) who tended to be in favour of remaining



in the European Union and mostly voted for Labour candidates in the 2017 British General Election. Sloam and Henn argue that the dominance of austerity politics and the rise of authoritarian-nationalist forms of populism led to the politicisation of Young British Millennials (7). For these young people, cultural as well as postmaterial issues, such as environmental protection, national identity and immigration, have become ever more important (7). The aim of Sloam and Henn's study is to conceptualise and put to the test the very notion of a youthquake. It is used to "describe seismic political activity that seems to be inspired by younger citizens" (8). They recognise the broader basis of the OED definition of youthquake but add a further layer to it. Sloam and Henn usefully expand the definition with the components of elections: "We would add that

'youthquake elections' are ones in which dramatic changes in how many young people vote, who they vote for and how active they are in the campaign have, quite literally, shaken up the status quo" (8). As their last chapter shows, there is strong empirical evidence pointing to the 2017 UK General Election as a "youthquake election".

In chapter two, Sloam and Henn provide a theoretical framework for their empirical case studies. Their overall argument is that young people are frustrated by mainstream politics and that they therefore seek out forms of political engagement other than traditional voting, which results in new forms of political activism. They focus especially on youth participation and how it is influenced by the larger developments on a global scale. Under the subheading of "shifting tectonic plates", they theorise the embeddedness of youth political engagement in political, economic, and social change (20-23). But they put a stronger focus on theories of youth participation in politics (24-28). Here they argue that social media has become a decisive factor in electoral politics (26). They argue that in the case of youthquake, social media was a driving force for left-wing politics and campaigns (26).

At the heart of the book lies the conceptualisation of "young cosmopolitans" (32-35). The authors emphasise the "cultural turn" which distinguishes younger from older generations but also the "leftward drift" of young people in the wake of prolonged economic austerity since 2008 (32). The key insight of the conceptualisation of young cosmopolitans is the following: "Cosmopolitan values apply to many, but not all, young people. ...cosmopolitan-left individuals are very likely to hold university

degrees, and to be students and women. Conversely, old, white males with low levels of educational attainment are least likely to possess these views” (34). Sloam and Henn present “young cosmopolitans” as a distinct political force united by common values and positions. These include “postmaterial issues”, such as Brexit, immigration and the environment, and “material issues” such as healthcare and housing (34f.). Sloam and Henn conceptualise young cosmopolitans in opposition to “authoritarian-nationalist forms of populism characterised by UKIP, Donald Trump and elements of the British Conservative Party” (35).

In chapter three, Sloam and Henn present the transformation of political participation and engagement by the youth. In line with Inglehart’s postmaterialist thesis they call it a “silent revolution”, because participation changes from defending material interests to negotiating new cleavages (53-57). Sloam and Henn argue that there is also a socio-demographic cleavage alongside the postmaterialist cleavage (59-63). They conclude by arguing for an intergenerational gap across the past major General Elections: “the predominant electoral cleavage was generational, with young people considerably less likely than their older contemporaries to vote at the General Elections in 2001, 2005 and 2010” (64).

In the fourth chapter, the authors turn to the 2016 EU referendum. Sloam and Henn put the historic Brexit vote into the larger historical context in the form of the rise of populist and neo-nationalistic forces across the globe. Even though the Brexit vote can be aligned within these political developments, Sloam and Henn point out that the case is more difficult in the Brexit case: “The EU referendum result was...defined by socio-economic cleavages *and* cultural conflicts. But the decision to leave the European Union was more nuanced than this would suggest” (72). Referenda, as they argue, are always a “plebiscite” on the popularity of the incumbent government. Furthermore, “internal cultural dynamics” (72) within the UK were also at play. The authors make the case that young people in favour of the Remain campaign are characterised by “cosmopolitan-left values and attitudes, as illustrated by their concerns for the economic consequences of a potential Brexit and by their strong support for cultural diversity” (73). Sloam and Henn present a convincing link between populism, cosmopolitanism and the question of Europe (73-75). They claim that anti-establishment sentiment against the EU are prevalent both in “authoritarian-nationalist and cosmopolitan-left politics” (74). The authors also take a close look at youth engagement during the EU referendum. Referring to YouGov studies, they show that the EU has not been a hot button issue for young people in the wake of the EU referendum. Furthermore, Sloam and Henn conceptualise young “Remainers” as cosmopolitan-left. To the authors the most compelling argument for this is that a vast majority of young Remainers (89%) agree that a wider diversity of culture are positive for Britain (81): “This paints a picture of young Remain voters as postmaterialistic, cosmopolitan liberals, who were at ease with cultural heterogeneity” (82).

On the one hand, one might interject that there were simply not enough young Remainers. On the other hand, there is enough evidence to suggest that young people were indeed energised – and politicised – by the Brexit vote (84-86). Sloam and Henn show the intragenerational differences in the young people. They argue that the young Remainers are best captured as *cosmopolitan-left* citizens. Sloam and Henn conclude their discussion thus:

“Young, well-educated, politically engaged individuals could be considered to be both winners and losers of globalisation. Whilst emphasizing the growing gap between the super-rich and everyone else, these young cosmopolitans tend to hold postmaterialist concerns over issues such as the environment and embrace the cultural diversity which defines their societies” (86).

In chapter five, the authors come to the most important example for their argument, the 2017 General Election in Great Britain. The election results saw improvements for the Conservative Party (42% and up 5.5 points in comparison to 2015). Yet the Labour Party came closer than most expected with a result of 40% which was up 9.6 point from 2015 (92). In line with their overall argument, Sloam and Henn claim: “We argue that principal driving forces behind the result included the increase in youth engagement and activism during the campaign and the vote, as well as the switch in youth support to the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn as standard-bearers for cosmopolitan-left sentiment” (92). They discuss the 2017 General Election in regard to several aspects: parties and youth mobilisation, youth turnout, the large support of young people for the Labour Party, and the policy dimension of the election.

Sloam and Henn use a content analysis to conclude that Labour paid more attention to young people than any other mayor party did in their respective manifestos (93-95). Labour was more successful in getting their message across to young people (96). Sloam and Henn argue that Labour’s social media strategy has been a large factor in their success (96-98). In addition, Jeremy Corbyn’s candidacy and leadership came across as “authentic and principled” (98). Sloam and Henn further acknowledge that Labour’s success can also be ascribed to the structural changes enforced under Ed Miliband’s party leadership from 2010 to 2015. During this period, the party explicitly spoke to young people with their party programme “Refounding Labour: A Party for the New Generation” (98). According to the data presented by the authors, a broad appeal to younger voters led to mobilising and engaging them. Young people turned out to vote in higher numbers than in previous elections, but nonetheless their turnout still was significantly lower in comparison to older age cohorts (99f.). As a second feature of the 2017 General Election, Sloam and Henn diagnose a “turning left” (101-104) of the younger cohorts, with massive wins for Labour in the 18-24 age group (62% for Labour vs 27% for the Conservative Party) as well as in the 25-34 and 35-44 year olds. Sloam and Henn add: “The youthquake extended beyond the youngest cohort” (101). What is surprising is that Brexit was not the leading policy issue for young people, rather the NHS was most often mentioned as the most important single issue in the 18-24 cohort. Vice versa, Brexit was the most important single issue for the over-65 cohort (104-106). Sloam and Henn convincingly present evidence for a correlation between young left-leaning people and the Remain campaign (106). They conclude this chapter by arguing in favour of the youthquake narrative. In the 2017 General Election they see a long-term *generational effect* as well as a short-term *period effect* at work (109). Young people vote differently to old people. With their analysis Sloam and Henn show that age and not class is the most decisive predictor of voting priorities. Yet they do not overlook *intragenerational differences* in their focus on young people. They conclude: “Clearly not all young people could be considered as participants or fellow travellers in this cosmopo-

litan-left movement, and it is much less reflective of young white men from poorer backgrounds with low levels of educational attainment” (109).

In the sixth chapter, the authors conclude by recapping their argument and by tying their findings back to the broader general political climate. Political entrepreneurs must act to engage with young people in the face of the rising challenges to democracy: “Frustrated by the practice and outcomes of mainstream democratic politics and the record of successive governments in office, many young people have become increasingly attracted to new – often postmaterialist – political agendas and new styles of politics in a search for alternative ways to actualise their political aspirations” (120f.). As the authors argue, the 2017 youthquake can be viewed as a reaction to these developments. Young people tend to be more open to multicultural concerns, they are astute to global inequalities, and they therefore develop a rather internationalist or cosmopolitan worldview. Yet, even though the authors are cautiously optimistic, they remain aware of a possible “cultural backlash” by young people who do not hold similar political views or are in different socio-economic backgrounds: “The future and momentum of the youthquake remains uncertain. The emergence of the new left-cosmopolitan group of young people has a mirror-image in the appearance of an economically-insecure left-behind group of young people who don’t share the same progressive values” (122). Sloam and Henn end on a cautious note by concluding that democracy in post-industrial times seems to be at a crossroads (123-125).

Overall, Sloam and Henn present a very interesting argument and provide a clear empirical case for the youthquake during the 2017

General Election in the UK. Maybe the young cosmopolitans proved wrong Theresa May, who once claimed that a citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere.¹ Young British people tend to be interested in national politics and to have a sense of cosmopolitan belonging. To remind readers of that on an empirical basis is welcome and promising. Sloam and Henn succeed at providing an empirically rich and informed study which goes beyond the usual lamentation of a politically disenfranchised youth – a story which we have become accustomed to hear in the public sphere. If democracy is at a crossroads, maybe the key to transformation is indeed found within young people and their transforming efforts in what politics and political activism mean today.

Notes

1 May, Theresa (2016): Keynote Speech at the Conservative Party Conference 2016. In: The Independent [Online]. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-speech-tory-conference-2016-in-full-transcript-a7346171.html>. Viewed 26 May 2019.

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